

1. Justice for Dragons

Woman's Voice: The core of the stigma, in the most obvious way, is that a lot of romance novels include sex.

And then you can just go deeper and say 'well these are books aimed at women so of course the patriarchy and the patriarchal literary world and broader world look down on them because if it's a women's genre, it can't be serious, it can't be legitimate, it can't be as good.'

Vanessa: That was Jamie Green, the newly hired Romance Columnist for the NYT review of books. The patriarchy doesn't just want to pay you less to do more work. The patriarchy doesn't just want to shame you for your body and then try to control it. The patriarchy also wants to make your pleasure and your desires seem dumb. It wants to ruin romance novels for you.

AND yet, despite their best efforts, romance novels are the single strongest force in the publishing industry. They bring in over 1.4 billion dollars a year. They take up the largest percentage of readers and sales of any genre in the fiction category. They subsidize "literary fiction". They live on the *New York Times* best-seller list. And yet because of the patriarchy, we think of them as silly, "women's things".

This podcast is about taking Romance novels seriously. They are read voraciously; by women in prison, women in nursing homes, doctors on their lunch breaks; by queer women, women of color, Republicans and white, coastal liberals. They are written by women, for women and about women. And about a year ago, writing a romance novel basically saved my life.

I'm Vanessa Zoltan and this is Hot and Bothered.

[theme music]

Vanessa: When I started writing my Romance novel, I was in the constant loops of two big obsessions. One: you might remember, there were a series of hurricanes hitting the Continental United States and Puerto Rico and it really seemed to me at least like the early signs of the apocalypse. I started doing a very committed amount of research on survival kits. I became obsessed with being prepared, not just physically, but emotionally and psychologically. What kind of apocalypse survivor did I want to be? One with a gun, hoarding my stuff, or one who was opening my doors to others in distress?

The other thing that was happening was I deciding whether or not to stay with my partner. I love this man in a way that I have never loved anyone but there were compromises associated with being with him that I didn't know if I could live with.

These two things combined; the world ending and not knowing how to write my own happy ending, were causing me nightly panic attacks. And reading Romance novels helped. But the

thing that got me to stop researching calorie rich foods to store for long periods of time, was when I started writing my own Romance novel.

Suddenly, even though I was in a world in which I could not see a happily ever after on a micro or macro scale, I was forcing myself to imagine one each night, as I crawled into bed with my laptop. And I realized: Writing a happy ending is a sacred practice. It is staring at nothing, a blank page, and creating something hopeful and beautiful.

And it is not just me. Romance novels are having a moment. At the exact time that women are realizing there is a literal conspiracy of men protecting each other as they silence us, the first African American Romance novelist made, both the New York Times best-seller list, and its 100 best books of the year list. In an absence of stories about good men in the news, we are writing them, willing them into being; training each other to re-imagine what we deserve in order to conjure these men for ourselves. We are all standing over a cauldron together, saying, “a pinch of consent, a dash of respect, large ears for great listening, and seeing if we can make this man emerge before our very eyes by simply expecting him to exist.

Romance novels, of course, are not just about resisting the patriarchy. They are for everyone; to imagine the love that they deserve in the world. Everyone who is paying attention to the world as it melts around us is having a hard time imagining a happy ending. We all need to practice imagination because however it is that we are going to get out of this mess, we sure as hell haven't figured it out yet.

I found writing Romance Novels so healing and hopeful that I gave it as a prescription to 10 of my friends. Friends who are single and looking for love. Friends who have been married for years but still miss old flames. Friends who were having a hard time getting pregnant. My sister-in-law who was pregnant with her first child and anxious about what it would do to her sense of self and her marriage.

Write a Romance novel, I told my friends. And they sure tried. Some succeeded. They all picked a trope. Love at First Sight. Marriage of Convenience. Accidental baby. And this first season of Hot & Bothered is a close look at what that was like for them to go through their writing process. We ask them what's like to stare at a blank page and try to figure out your thoughts on love.

Then, on a whim, I emailed my favorite Romance novelist, Julia Quinn, and asked if she would teach my friends and I how to write a Romance novel. And she said yes.

Vanessa: Hi Julia!

Julia Quinn: Hey, how are you?

Vanessa: Good, how are you?

Vanessa: At the end of the episode we'll all get an assignment from Julia and I encourage you to write along.

[music]

Vanessa: The first friend whose heart I was going to heal with the power of writing, was Bryce. I thought he was a good candidate. First of all, he said yes. Second of all, Bryce has been having trouble with love since our friendship began.

Vanessa: We met right as my engagement was ending. And I feel like for a large chunk of our friendship, we bonded over singledom.

Bryce: That is very very true.

Vanessa: Like we've gone through a lot of dating trials together.

Bryce: Yes. Yes. We've gone on a lot of post-date dates to debrief the dates we were on.

Vanessa: Yes. And I feel like usually the conclusion we come to is that no one is good enough for either of us.

Bryce: That's entirely accurate. Well, I'm garbage but you're perfect and no one is good enough for you.

Vanessa: Bryce is a catholic, gay man and his family has lived in rural Texas for 4 generations. We've been friends for six years and can happily chatter away for hours. We talk politics and family dynamics. But mostly we talk about our two favorite things to gossip about: our love lives and pop-culture.

Bryce: Books, movies, TV, are definitely how I feel like I get my emotional release, which I don't generally have interpersonally. Not because I'm not capable of it, but because I –

Vanessa: It's icky.

Bryce: It is, it is icky! Emotions are for the inside where you put them in a box and and you put that box in a closet and then you just ignore it.

Vanessa: I didn't think writing a romance novel would find Bryce a boyfriend or suddenly make him touchy feely. I just thought it would open up his imagination a little bit; let him spend some time imagining a happy relationship. We met a couple of times during his writing process, but in order to prepare for our first conversation, he didn't need to have written a word. I asked him to know the basic story that he was exploring and to pick a romance trope.

All romance novels follow a trope. That is, some formula for the plot. There are hundreds and hundreds of tropes. There's 'enemies to lovers' where you fall in love with your arch rival. There's 'friends to lovers' where you fall in love with your best friend. Bryce picked updated fairytale for his romance novel.

Bryce: I think that fairytales are very ripe for reinvention. And for me, one of the reasons I always appeal to it is as a gay man, there weren't a lot of stories, growing up, that you could internalize that represented you. So, sort of a homosexual romantic relationship just didn't exist, for me – especially growing up in rural Texas where I'm from – to sort of see myself represented in. And, in that way I think it is sort of a trope that is, not even ripe for subversion, I don't think adapting it to be a gay narrative is subverting it. But that was something that I found appealing too, because I knew that I wanted to write some kind of gay story.

Vanessa: So which fairy tale did you pick?

Bryce: I picked beauty and the beast. But it's also kind of Rapunzel inspired... and a twist off them as well because it's sort of a modern thing and it's not fantastical but it's inspired by the situation in which these characters find themselves.

Vanessa: And he knew who his main character was.

Bryce: Billy lives in a small college town in the Midwest where he runs a bookstore that previously belonged to his parents. And his mother, I think, died when he was young, it was just him and his dad –

Vanessa: — Very fairytale.

Bryce: Very fairytale. There's only ever one parent in a fairytale.

Vanessa: Max.

Bryce: Max. So he runs this bookstore, owns this bookstore. And is someone who, because he loves to read, also has this understanding that there is a much wider world out there than this town where he's lived his entire life – though he hasn't had the opportunity to explore that world. So he thinks of his life very much in comparison to these narratives perhaps comparing himself to them, or trying to map his own experience onto a narrative arc that he could see happening. In a kind of meta-critical approach to his own life. It's very healthy.

Vanessa: He also sounds a little pretentious.

Bryce: Oh, entirely pretentious. I'm pretentious, I can't write a non-pretentious character.

Vanessa: It would be like writing a character outside of gravity.

Vanessa: Bingo. A young gay man, caught in a small town with only 'stories' to give him access to the wider world? Sound like anyone we know? Bryce is obviously Billy. Got it. I can remember that. Bryce starts with a B. So does Billy. DONE.

Aside from Billy, there is Alex. Miserable ex-Musician who has moved from New York City. He's Billy's love interest. But, twist, there's also Sean- long time boyfriend of Alex. Who has just gotten his dream job of a tenure track professor in small town MN. He's the reason Alex has come to town.

Although Bryce knew who his 3 main characters were from very early on in his writing process, it took him awhile to figure out what he wanted to do with them; what their fates would be.

Bryce: this is going to be controversial.

Vanessa: do it.

Bryce: As someone who is kind of skeptical of a traditional happy ever after, I don't know if Billy and Alex actually end up together.

Vanessa: That's Billy, the bookstore owner, B for Bryce. and Alex who's new in town.

Bryce: And perhaps the happily ever after is actually Alex and his partner Sean reaching a healthy point in their relationship again. And in seeing this healthy relationship, Billy realizes what it is that he wants more in his life, and is then empowered to go on and get it.

[long silence]

Vanessa I mean, that sounds like a great book. That's not a romance novel. Your two main characters have to fall in love.

Vanessa: I am not just being a random hard ass about this. Obviously Happy endings are important to me and this experiment. But they're also a part of the actual definition of what a Romance novel is. Here's Jaime Green, from the NYTimes again:

Jaime Green: Romance novel, because it is a 'genre' has an official definition. Um, and I'm going to do it off the top of my head, but this comes from the Romance Writers of America. So a Romance novel is a novel that first of all has a happy and emotionally satisfying ending, and where the central story line is about Romantic love. Whether at the end of the book they're going to live happily ever after or happy for now can vary, but there's always a happy ending and its always about romantic love.

Vanessa: And I'm not the only person who thinks they're the MOST IMPORTANT part. And I'm certainly not above confirmation bias! I called up someone I know who also loves romance novels, Jessica Luther. She's read 100 romance novels in the last year. I didn't ask anything specific about happy endings, because I am a true scientist, I just asked 'why do you like romance novels?' And here is what she answered.

Jessica Luther: I'm a journalist, I work primarily on stories about gendered violence, it's very hard work a lot of the time, it can be emotionally exhausting, and I love the fact that I can pick up a romance novel and know, that no matter what, the conflict that's within the novel itself that at the end, these people I'm invested in and this relationship that I'm invested in, that it will have a happy ending and that I will feel happy at the end. That means a lot to me at a personal level and I love that part of the genre and I count on it and it means that I can trust, whatever's happening in the book, that I will feel good when it's over.

Vanessa: Why write a romance novel if you're not going to write a happy ending? He said that he wanted to write a story that he as a gay kid in rural Texas could see himself represented in. So why wasn't he giving himself that? Why wasn't he giving himself a gay Fairy Tale with a Happily Ever After?

The truth is that I had a suspicion as to why he didn't want to imagine Billy B is for Bryce as ending up with someone.

Vanessa: Okay, so here's the question: Are you Will? Will is Billy, nicknames are hard. He nodded.

Bryce: 110%

Vanessa: So what do you think that says about you that you can't imagine a version in which you meet a soulmate and he leaves someone for you, what does that say about you? How do you feel about what that says about you?

Bryce: No because I think that I'm still in the first chapter of my own story. And that would be me telling or imagining myself 2/3 of the way through my own book. Which, I don't think is a place I'm at yet. So this is like a prequel, right? Getting this character to the place where he'll need to be to go on to have that like beautiful romance. But he's not there yet. But he's going to have a lot of fun along the way.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Bryce: And will fall in love. And there will be romance. But sometimes romances end.

Vanessa: Yes.

Bryce: And that's healthy and good.

Vanessa: Yes. But here's my argument for why I would push you for it to become a more traditional romance. And if doesn't, I love you and we'll still include this episode. But the reason why I would push you is because I think it's important to imagine yourself into those happy relationships. Your version of a happy relationship, and if that's a throuple, if that's living apart – you know, whatever that is, but I think until we start imagining ourselves into those things they won't happen.

Bryce: No it's true.

Vanessa: I mean...

Bryce: It's like The Secret, I need to visualize what I want, so that it could maybe manifest.

Vanessa: You need to visualize what you deserve. My fear is that you're setting a low bar for your own happiness and that by not imagining your ideal happiness, you're not going to demand it.

Bryce: stop, I'm going to cry.

Vanessa: So that's why I think you should write a true happily ever after.

Bryce: This is, that's – Vanessa that's hard! And I don't like doing hard things.

Vanessa: Well that's my challenge to you. We're going to get together again in a month and I promise I will love you just as much if you make another decision, but that's what I'll say.

Bryce: Challenge accepted.

Vanessa: Okay.

Vanessa: Bryce and I parted for a month and I thought about his resistance to Happily Ever Afters. I have been single. I have been single while really yearning for a relationship. And I have been single, really yearning for a relationship, and profoundly sure that I would never find one. Some people end up spending their lives alone. And when I was single it felt important to me to come to terms with the fact that I might be one of those people.

Also like Bryce, I grew up feeling isolated. To a much lesser degree of course. But all of my female cousins wanted to be married by 22. They knew where to shop, and were all good at makeup and took dance class. I wore overalls and did Karate. And I was loud. All the grown men I knew sort of hated me. And the marriages that I saw all involved women serving men. I was too lazy to want to serve a man.

When I was around 14 years old, I said one of the worst things that I have ever said in my whole life. My mom was giving me advice about something that I don't remember and I said to her, "I don't care what you think, I don't want to be anything like you. I don't want to be anything like any of you." By, "any of you" I meant my mom's friends my cousins, my aunts. There wasn't a woman who I knew who I wanted to be like. They were the witches in my updated fairy tale; trying to lock me up into marrying a Jewish man and taking care of him as my primary duty for the rest of my life.

You see, I loved Rapunzel when I was a kid. I had my mom read it to me every night for months and months. What I loved about it was that as soon as the story ended and my mom would kiss me goodnight, I would start to picture *my* prince, who was out roaming around, looking for me. Who could save me from the witches. Who thought overalls were very practical and karate sounded fun. Who didn't want to be served but wanted to take care of himself. Who was optionally Jewish, not required Jewish.

My relationship with this fictional prince was as close as I ever came to having a relationship with God. I would lay in bed at night and believe that there was someone out there who was ready to love me for who I really was.

WHY WAS BRYCE TAKING GOD AWAY FROM ME? Or, why didn't he want that for himself?

A month passed. Bryce came back into the studio and I was ready for his apology.

Vanessa: Hi Bryce.

Bryce: Hi Vanessa.

Vanessa: Did you find your happy ending?

Bryce: I have become convinced of the existence of happy endings and I think that I found one for this story.

Vanessa: Ok, tell me. By the way, Hi, how are you?

Bryce: I'm ... processing a lot things right now. This has been a very stressful spring for me. But I found this happy ending because I realized that I was writing this story about the wrong person.

Vanessa: Say more.

Bryce: Well, I thought, it's actually Rapunzel is the story that I'm telling.

Vanessa: So Will the bookstore owner is no longer going to be the main character.

Bryce: No longer the main character. Though the main romantic foil, yes.

Vanessa: OK so maybe by switching our main character he's trying to get himself to his prince.

Vanessa: So now you decided to write about Alex.

Bryce: I have decided to write about Alex and it will be a happy ending in that love will win in the end and um ... Yes. And he falls back in love with his long time many year partner Shaun and has this flirtation with Will. His prince. But decides that he's actually happy where he is.

Vanessa: Doesn't that make Sean the prince and ?

Bryce: Sean can't be the prince if he's the one who brought Alex into isolation here.

Vanessa: Here, obviously being rural Minnesota, away from New York City, in case you've forgotten, but of course you haven't forgotten.

Vanessa: I mean....

Bryce: We have a different understanding of what a happily ever after is.

Vanessa: Yes and no. I, of course, believe that is is super happy to realize that you're in love with your partner. But if Sean is the prince the that would be like saying that my awful uncles were the princes all along! And they weren't. Trust me on this.

Plus that now means that he has his new main character (Alex) is ending up with the witch! And I still suspect that Bryce sees himself as his main character. So, great, he sees himself ending up with someone. Progress. But with a witch? That is not an HEA!

Vanessa: So why are you single, in your opinion? If you don't want to be? Have you just not met the right guy? That's the easy answer.

Bryce: I've been trying. And that's... I think we ha - I haven't met the right guy. I meet so many guys, I'm trying.

Vanessa: I know.

Bryce: And that's one of the disappointing things is actually right before we started this project I had started seeing someone who I really really liked and it has just ended a week and a half ago... and so that adds an additional layer of complexity to this entire project. But, I just get the same line, which is always, always: Bryce you're so funny. Bryce you're so fun to hang out with. Bryce I really think that this is probably just friends.

[beautiful pause]

Vanessa: I mean that's devastating to hear.

Bryce: It's so devastating!

Vanessa: I've gotten that line in my life.

Bryce: I've started responding, the last... four guys who've said that to me, I've actually started responding "I have too many friends already. I don't have time to see all the friends that I actually like, I don't need another one. Thank you though."

Vanessa: I think all of these men who just wanted to be his friend are witches but his prince is still out there looking for him.

Bryce: going into this I think I was projecting a lot of myself onto the character of Will. When perhaps I've been ascribing a lot of my worst personalities actually to Alex. Which is not being honest with yourself, not being honest with what you want, and actually presenting a version of yourself that you think is what's going to make the people around you happier, when actually it's sabotaging yourself and probably all your relationships with other people.

Vanessa: So what do Will and Shaun love about Alex?

Bryce: I think for me to answer that question I'm going to have to figure out what people love about me and I don't know

Vanessa: Oh, is that what they're going to have to do?

Bryce: Dammit Vanessa. I don't know.

Vanessa: I mean he h- just, let's talk about the story.

Bryce: I that he's -

Vanessa: Forget that it's a metaphor

Bryce: I think that he's funny.

Vanessa: Okay.

Bryce: I think that he can make, like, make a situation very enjoyable. Right? He can provide light and warmth and happiness to a room in which he's in. And I think that's lovable about a person. That he's someone that you want to spend time with because he's easy and enjoyable to be around.

Vanessa: Sounds like a dream boat.

Bryce: Maybe.

Vanessa: So I feel like we've made progress but we still don't totally know our happy ending.

Bryce: How do you fall in love with a witch Vanessa?

Vanessa: I mean, I have.

Bryce: You're right, you love me.

Vanessa: But we want more for him than that, right? He deserves more than my love. He deserves the love of a prince. And we also want him to see himself as a prince. He's writing a witch/witch love story and that seems, well... wrong to me. So I decided to tell him my admittedly creepy theory about princes.

Vanessa: So I think the reason I love fairytales is because the prince is a god character to me. There's someone out there who loves you and sees you even though you're in a tower, even though you're in the belly of the whale, even though you're just a peasant girl. They see the thing in you that's worthy of love.

Vanessa: He can't argue with that! It's God!

Bryce: I really disagree. I always hated the prince character in fairy tales because I always found them to be rather vapid trophy collectors. They don't see the goodness in you. In every fairytale, the reason why he picks the princess, the reason why he picks the peasant, is because she is the most beautiful girl in the land. Like that has nothing to do with her rich interior life. It's because she will look really great on a much smaller throne next to his. And in many cases in fairytales, has never even met this woman before deciding for her that what she needs is to leave the situation entirely. And I always really found that very presumptive, and I didn't appreciate it.

Vanessa: Sometimes he also likes her singing, not just her looks.

Bryce: Another external quality of a person that is in no way revelatory of her character or personality or ultimate desires. And that makes her even more of a trophy! An object where oh like Rapunzel, please come down, then people can look at you in my palace and also hear you sing. I can trot you out - look at my beautiful and talented wife. Isn't she beautiful and talented? Also she's my wife. My wife. That's pretty horrible, fairy tales are sexist.

Vanessa: Well that backfired.

Bryce: The witch is always wronged actually and somehow, perhaps overreacts, but is responding to an actual slight, not just a perceived slight. Whereas I don't know if the princes actually have ever faced some sort of disappointment or hardship, because they triumph over everything. A tiny human man and a dragon? The dragon should win by any stretch of the imagination. But, the prince does.

Vanessa: Justice for dragons.

Vanessa: Dammit. He has a point. Round one, Vanessa but Round 2, Bryce. [pause] So he is right about princes. Good thing I'm already an atheist or that would really sting. But what does that mean for Bryce?

The thesis of this project is that the stories we tell ourselves matter. If we tell ourselves stories in which men are good then we will demand good men in the world. And Bryce, who I love, is telling himself a story where he's the witch! Or at least, all he deserves is the love of a witch. If I give into him; that princes are bad... where does that leave him? As the witch who ends up melting or whatever at the end of the story?

I didn't know how to make sense of all of my feelings, so we called an expert. No, not a therapist. I'm obviously between them right now. But the John L. Loeb Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures and of Folklore and Mythology, Maria Tatar. We'll hear from her after the break.

She looks like Meryl Streep's gorgeous, Harvard academic sister. With a bike. Which is how she rolled up to the studio. She was tenured at Harvard University in 1978, when there basically weren't women professors at Harvard. She has a Guggenheim. She's a fucking rock-star. Why she talked to me, I'll never know. But here she is, in 2019, and she still makes fairy tales sound like her favorite lover.

Maria Tatar: Fairytales are... always have a touch of magic in them. And in addition to that - and this is why I'm so attracted to them - they have high coefficients of weirdness. They are just something - strange things happen and you're startled and shocked, but no one in the fairytale world is. So I think that really is a defining feature that distinguishes

fairy tales from say, wonderland, the world of wonderland or neverland. So fairytales have that touch of magic, they're also, and this is what fascinates me too, they are migratory. They move around from one culture to another with ease, from one medium to another. And then they are about transformation. About change. About metamorphosis. They tell us that things don't always have to be the way they are. That there is a world of ought to be, should be, might be. They give us the counterfactuals, the great what-ifs.

Vanessa: Yes! That is exactly how I feel about Romance novels! The world as it ought to be, as it should be! The counterfactuals of GOOD MEN and consent of BRYCE FALLING IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE WHO DOES NOT WANT TO BE HIS DUMB FRIEND!

Vanessa: So our author Bryce, we let each of our authors pick a romance trope and he was excited to pick updated fairytale because for him growing up in rural texas as a gay man, He was like 'there are no stories that I can envision myself into.' That he always had to be calling himself the princess or the queen - or what he really saw himself often as is the witch. And I'm wondering, yeah to what extent do feel like these are detrimental stories?

Maria: You know I remember receiving many letters - not so many these days - about precisely the problem of not being able to identify with fairytale characters. I mean look at snow white, she's the fairest of them all. And actually the Grimms have her 'white as snow' so that whiteness could represent innocence, but it's Disney that added 'skin white as snow.' And suddenly we have all of these pastel princesses coming to us from Disney, and the Disney version becomes the dominant version of the fairytale. It becomes top-down in the 40s, 50s and 60s, and it's only recently that we've been getting this bottom-up, you know the answer back. So one of the great things today I think is that we have role reversals in fairytales. So think of Shrek for example, where monstrosity is embraced. You know the other, who is normally demonized and to whom we have a relationship of hostility often in fairytales, becomes the hero, the one you want to emulate and become. So Fiona turns into a shrek like figure and they live happily ever after with their green monster children, who are quite adorable. Suddenly we see things differently."

Vanessa: Yes. OK. Of course there is a moral responsibility to make these stories new; radically new. I don't want the pastel princesses back, like, at all. The proliferation of stories about helpless princesses who need a man to come in and save her is part of why we are in this MeToo mess; Snow White and Sleeping Beauty both have men sexually molest them while they were passed out. I'm super against that; to be clear. I guess I just thought that making these stories new meant putting two gay characters at the center of the love story; as the prince and the Rapunzel. But the more radical and exciting way to make them new is to make the witch the hero.

Underneath all his protest about princes and witches, maybe this is what Bryce was trying to tell me, that we need more of a change than making an old oppressive story gay. It doesn't feel disruptive enough to him to just have the love story be a gay one. He rejects the whole thing. The world sees him as a witch and he wants to own that and dress it up and make it beautiful. Which *is* empowering. Bryce was saying this all along and I was just scared that he was coming from a place of self-loathing. I thought princes meant happily ever after. I, it turns out, was, um, what's the word? Wrong?

The witches turn into dragons. And dragon beats prince every time.

We had one more round to go. Bryce and I came back into the studio for a third and final chat.

Vanessa: So working on this trope with you has been like the most thought provoking, because I think about what you've talked about with complications of who the witch is and who the hero is and all the bad implications of what a fairytale can be, so I'm wondering if you've had any success in imaging a happily ever after - how you're feeling about the trope of fairytale.

Bryce: I have, I have definitely gotten to happily ever after for this story, which I wasn't anticipating from the beginning. But I have been spending a lot of time thinking about, by virtue of fairy tales which so often involve some sort of rescue, like who is given agency and who is doing the rescuing and should you be relying on other people to rescue you or can other people empower you to rescue yourself.

Vanessa: Yeah, I mean what happens, right, what it sounds to me like is that Alex has been beating up against the tower and then realizes that he's not in a tower, that he's been in a castle all along.

Bryce: yeah.

Vanessa: It's been about a year since we had this conversation, and I have an update for you. Our witchy Bryce, has found his witch. And they are living happily ever after, at least for now.

Here's the thing about the apocalypse. For all my talk about the power of Happy Endings, I haven't stopped thinking about it. A year ago, before Romance novel writing came into my life, the apocalypse was an unhealthy obsession, but, it's equally stupid to plug your ears and pretend it's not happening. Having hope isn't about living in complete denial. I haven't stopped living in conversation with the apocalypse. And when I started writing Romance novels I didn't do it to replace the apocalypse stories I told myself. I did it to tell myself more than one story. To throw something new into my cauldron; Happily Ever Afters are possible even when fires are burning down forests. The happiness doesn't mean that the forests haven't burnt. And the scorched earth doesn't mean that we don't continue to love. Both are true. Which Bryce reminded me of. He's the prince and the witch. Both are true.

[music]

Vanessa: Now is the time in the podcast in which we give you your writing assignment. No pressure. You just, like Bryce, need to morally right the wrongs of thousands of years of storytelling. Or you're part of the problem.

All those months ago, when I was reading Romance novels to keep me from spiraling into the emotional abyss, there was one author who I turned to again and again: Julia Quinn:

Vanessa: Hi Julia!

Julia: Hey! How are you?

Vanessa: good, how are you?

Julia: I am really excellent because I just finished a book.

Vanessa: Well that is the perfect time for you to be giving advice to all these people who are writing their first romance novel.

Julia: Well, yes and no, because yeah, I just finished one, and no because it was *so* hard. You could write 30 of them and it doesn't necessarily get easier.

Vanessa: Right, so that means that the first one is gonna be hard but that's not because you're new, you should try.

Julia: Yes.

Vanessa: So, for the sake of this podcast, we are going to be walking everybody through a week by week process, so that they can write their own romance novellas. Our authors every week are going to show how that process worked for them, but we want to just provide weekly assignments so people can do this at home.

Julia: One thing I want to caution everybody about is that even though we're going to give out assignments, there is no one correct way to write a romance novel, or really any novel, and just be aware that if you're having trouble this doesn't mean that this isn't for you, that the whole process isn't for you, may just mean that this method isn't.

Vanessa: Yeah, if you find that the exact assignments aren't working for you, just keep writing along with us and hopefully these conversations will still be helpful. But, all that said, now let's give people assignments.

Julia: Yes, so, the vast majority of romances have two main characters, there are some now that have more than two, but I think for simplicity's sake, and given that this is

probably your first attempt at this, let's start with people doing just two. So the first assignment is, pick one of those characters, and it may be the one with whom you identify with more. So for me, I am a heterosexual female, and I write romances about heterosexual couples, so obviously the character with whom I identify more would be the heroine, as opposed to the hero. If you're writing, say, a gay romance, just pick one then. One that maybe has something you identify with more, it could be the personal history, it could be —

Vanessa: I mean, Bryce, in this episode, he ended up picking one character who he really identified with and it was the parts that he hated in himself the most were the parts that he saw in this character. But I think it allowed him to really empathize with that character.

Julia: yeah, and it's tough. Often the characters who are in some ways more like you are very difficult to write. So there is that. So pick one character who you more identify with. Write that character's history. cause I have always found that I can't really get going on a book until I know who that character is, how they came to be the person they are now, so I will end up with in my synopsis writing a lot about what has happened to this character before page one. And a lot of these things, they may never come up in the book, but i'd like to think that because I know it, I'm able to write a more fully realized character.

Vanessa: I love that in the first week, write everything that you're going to leave out of the book about this character. Write everything that they know about themselves before we meet them. That's so helpful. So this has been the first episode of Hot and Bothered and that is your first assignment. Go write your main character, we can't wait to read what you've written. Thanks Julia!

Julia: No problem!

Vanessa: One more thing before we're done. I kept thinking about what Bryce was saying. That witches, of course, are loveable and can find love. Which made me realize that there's another witch I love. So I called her to offer her what I now realized is a long overdue apology.

Vanessa's Mom: Hi Sweetie, how are you?

Vanessa: I'm okay, how are you?

Vanessa's Mom: I'm well thank you. What's up?

Vanessa: where are you?

Vanessa's Mom: I'm on the 405 going north on my way home.

Vanessa: You're in the car?

Vanessa's Mom: Yes.

Vanessa: So I have a quick question for you.

Vanessa's Mom: Yes?

Vanessa: I am wondering if you remember the following memory. We were living in Porter Ranch, and you were doing something in the kitchen, and I was in the den, and I think I was playing with a dog and like, complaining to you about something.

Vanessa's Mom: That sounds realistic.

Vanessa: Uh-huh. And you fairly assumed that giving me advice would be a nice thing to do, and so you gave me advice. And I interrupted you and I said, "I don't care what you think, I don't want to be anything like you."

Vanessa's Mom: I have zero recollection of that and hope it's just a figment of your imagination.

Vanessa: You don't, that doesn't ring even true as possibly something I could have said to you when I was like fourteen or fifteen?

Vanessa's Mom: You could have said it, for sure, but I don't think you would have. You probably thought it, but I don't remember you verbalizing it at all.

Vanessa: No I definitely did because I remember what you said back.

Vanessa's Mom: what did I say?

Vanessa: You said, "well that's fair, but I still think my advice is worth listening to."

Vanessa's Mom: I was pretty smart back then, wasn't I?

Vanessa: Do you think it's true, do you think that I turned out like you?

Vanessa's Mom: You're better than me sweetheart.

Vanessa: Uuuugh, that's bad radio mom.

Vanessa's Mom: Oh, but it's true. Did you turn out like me? No. I think honestly, I think there's a lot of life lessons that you got through me and from me that you have adopted and made your own, which makes you the person that you are, and even better.

Vanessa: well, this was all just a ruse to get you to say that you're proud of me, and have it be recorded.

Vanessa's Mom: Well, I tell you I'm proud of you all the time.

Vanessa: no, this is the first time you've ever said it.

Vanessa's Mom: and you are my absolute touchstone in life. And my go-to person whether you want it or not. So.

Vanessa: [laughs] Well mom, I don't even wanna be anything like you, so, you probably shouldn't call me.

Vanessa's Mom: okay, never again sweetheart.

Vanessa: Yeah, thanks mom.

Vanessa's Mom: What are you doing in five minutes, I'll call you then.

Vanessa: [laughs] Yeah, I'll call you when I'm walking home from the studio.

Vanessa's Mom: I love you honey.

Vanessa: Love you too, thanks mom.

Vanessa's Mom: of course, bye my angel.

[music]

Vanessa: If you want to read Bryce's story, you can go to our website:

hotandbotheredrompod.com

Follow us on twitter and instagram @therompod

Our Romance Teacher is Julia Quin

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